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Conspiracy and Rage: Analysis of Cicero's Political Actions

"But to be sure, only that man appears to me to be alive and make the most of life who by devoting himself to some enterprise, seeks fame for a glorious deed or good practice. (Sallust,23)"

During Cicero's consulship for the Roman Republic, he encountered an array of revolutionary cases that altered Roman democracy. One of the most paramount examples was the case against Lucius Sergius Catilina, familiarly known as Catiline. Cataline was a prominent Roman politician who is infamously known for his conspiracy to overthrow the Roman government, disrupting the Roman political system. It is hard to know exactly what happened and what crime was actually committed due to a multitude of uninstantiated evidence however, the closest thing that we have to a recount of what transpired back then is found in the testimonial speech given by another Roman politician, Gaius Sallustius Crispus, commonly known as Sallust.

The speaker, Sallust, showcased immense bravery when giving his speech about the war with Catiline. Sallust is steadfast in his conviction that he tried to remain as truthful as possible when it came to his recollection of events. He first starts by delving into the background of Catiline's youth, saying that he came from a noble family but, was exposed to gruesome crimes and environments that made him a quite reckless and cunning individual, one that expressed intense passions. Following the explanation of characteristics that Catiline inherited from his childhood, Sallust then goes on to explain the conspiracy that shadows him regarding the Roman government. It is thought that Catiline had the aim to rally troops and recruit volunteers to go along with his plan to overthrow the Roman political system. As a power-hungry politician, Catiline was not content with his current role in politics and is believed to have had the intention

to seize control over those who were currently in power to, instead, implement his very own agenda. He had plans to assassinate monumental key figures such as Cicero and his co-consul Gaius Antonius so that way he could subvert the Senate to enforce his own political objectives. Sallust states, “Catiline himself had high hope as a candidate for the consulship; the senate was not at all alert; all was secure and quiet, but those conditions were thoroughly advantageous for Catiline. (Ch. 16)” Sallust’s speech is incredibly important to the audience so that way they can get an understanding of the case at hand.

In response to the plans and conspiracy of Catiline, Cicero dispatched a series of speeches called the Catilinarian Orations. In these orations, Cicero can be painted as overdramatic and delegitimate when it comes to the plans of Catiline considering it is such a conspiracy with not a lot of concrete evidence. In many instances, people could compare Cicero to a modern conspiracist as illustrated in Chapters 4 and 5 in Muirhead and Rosenblum’s “A Lot of People Are Saying.” Muirhead and Rosenblum describe new conspiracists as follows, “The new conspiracists spew attacks, expressing not only long-held grievances but also innumerable others as they arise and reveling in the outrage their claims generate. (pg. 82)” The authors describe how new conspiracists entertain a form of discourse that goes over just simply disseminating conspiratorial ideas. However, in the case of the war with Catiline, Cicero does not go as far as Muirhead and Rosenblum’s definition of new conspiracism. The example that I will use to support my argument is Chapter 5 of “A Lot of People Are Saying” and Cicero’s first and second Catilinarian Orations.

In the first Catilinarian Oration, Cicero focuses on exposing the conspiracy of treason regarding Catiline and his actions to the Senate. “You are trapped on every side; all your plans are as clear as daylight to us. Let us go through them together. (1.6)” Cicero’s accusation of

treason against Catiline is of major concern to the Republic and its stability. Urgently, Cicero appeals to the Senate and expresses that they must not wait any longer to take action against Catiline. That the future of Rome deeply relies on immediate initiative. In Cicero's second Catilinarian Oration, he begins to outline the specifics of Catiline's conspiracy while still evoking a sense of urgency in the audience. In this oration, Cicero lays out the claimed events that would convict Catiline of treachery even though he does not have much concrete evidence to back up his argument. "I described what he had done that night, where he had been, what he had planned for the following night, and how he had mapped out the plan for the whole war. (2.13)" Following the orations, Cicero leaves the audience feeling a sense of panic. He leaves them feeling grateful for him and his ability to stop Catiline in his tracks, "Citizens, it is worth my enduring the storm of this ill-deserved and unfounded hatred, provided only that you are spared the horror and danger of a civil war. (2.15)"

Although Cicero may go over the top in his conjecture against Catiline, it is not enough to compare him to a new conspiracist by Muirhead and Rosenblum's terms. The specific example I will use to help my claim is in Chapter 5 under the "Rejecting Simple Facts: Obama's Birth Certificate" section. In this section, the authors dive into the right side's conspiracy concerning verifiable facts that pertain to Obama's birthplace. "The birther conspiracy, which claims that Barack Obama was born in Kenya and was ineligible for the presidency under the requirements of the Constitution, is a prime example of rejection of simple, verifiable facts. (pg. 103-104)" The authors define this as an example of birtherism, "Birtherism epitomizes intransigent denial of simple facts. (pg. 106)" Cicero, although he conspiracies, does not go as far as to negate truthful facts. He is simply stating the information that he was told so that way he can let the audience know just what exactly they are dealing with. The whole case is a

conspiracy, but should that make it any less important of a case? The conspiracy at hand is one that would overturn and dismantle the entire Roman Republic. If Catiline had been able to follow through with these plans, a civil war might have been on their hands and they could forget the practice of Democracy entirely. Cicero did not engage in the type of new conspiracy that is laid out in Muirhead and Rosenblum's chapters. He did not erode the trust with the Republic as he saved him from a vicious crime.

Although you can argue that Cicero engaged in conspiratorial rhetoric and delegitimization due to his acts of laying down events without concrete evidence to back them up, he does not fit within the definition of a new conspiracist as mentioned in Muirhead and Rosenblum's article. Because Cicero does not engage in dismissing verifiable facts, he does not erode the norms of democratic public discourse in Rome.